



# Collective Impact and Coalition-Building: A Dynamic Relationship

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## abstract:

In this sixth article in the series *Case-making and Systems Change in Arts and Cultural Education*, we explore elements that are foundational to changemaking coalitions. The article describes some shared characteristics of collective impact projects and coalition building as well as how they differ. It describes the strategic and structural elements that enable effective coalitions. Coalition building requires advocates to work continuously to align a vision of the ideal with the reality of the everyday. The iterative work of coalitions means continuous improvising, evolving, and a commitment to authentic collaboration.

## keywords:

Collective impact, coalitions, collaboration, strategic, systems change

## suggested citation:

Schell, Laurie T. (2022) Collective Impact and Coalition-Building: A Dynamic Relationship, *Creative Generation Journal*, 3:1, 34-41, DOI: 10.511631/creative-gen014

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*As part of our commitment to authentically engaged learning, this article has been formatted to encourage critical dialogue with the text. Throughout, there are numerous spaces to write, draw, or otherwise reflect while reading the text.*

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## Introduction

*Collective impact* is a disciplined, yet flexible cross-sector approach to solving social and environmental problems, (Kania *et al*, 2014). *Coalition-building* is a structured cross-sector approach to advocacy and policy change, (Raynor, n.d.). Considered together, they become mutually supportive.

In this sixth article in the series *Case-making and Systems Change in Arts and Cultural Education*, we explore the strategic and structural elements that are foundational to changemaking coalitions. The strategies discussed apply to both *Advocacy for Field* and *Advocacy for Sector*; this article specifically focuses in on the following key concepts for practitioners:

- See the larger system and work within a local context
- Balance organizational structure and flexibility
- Build adaptive processes that encourage engagement
- Acknowledge progress at all levels

## Many Hands

In the field of arts and cultural education, the term “collective impact” has been associated primarily with a programmatic approach to systems change through a unique confluence of public investments. Not structured for advocacy or policy outcomes *per se*, collective impact in arts education is gaining traction with successful programs such as those funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

The five conditions of collective impact are: common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support (Kania *et al*, 2014).

According to the NEA grant guidelines (2021), Collective Impact programs must include robust data collection, cross-sector partners, a logic model and strategic planning, shared measurement, and programming activities that support overall goals. Collective Impact programs are large-

scale projects that create lasting systems change tailored to community needs (NEA website, n.d.).

Granted, it isn't easy to create meaningful projects that address all the necessary components. It takes thoughtful consideration, time, and energy to create and maintain a collective impact project.

Collective Impact projects are successful for what they are able to do— bring cross-sector stakeholders together to work toward a common goal. In the arts education field, they have successfully moved small projects to a larger, more partnership-driven stage. That said, they are not necessarily set up to achieve long-term, policy-driven systemic change. For that to happen, a coalition is the more appropriate structure.

To give a sense of the scope of a collective impact project, the description for grantee Austin Independent School District reads, "To support the expansion of the Creative Learning Initiative, a collective impact project. Collaborating with Austin-based MINDPOP and arts partners across the city, the goal of the initiative is to create arts-rich schools and provide equitable access to arts education for students across the school district. Project activities will include

developing and implementing Creative Campus Plans for schools, leadership training for school administrators, and professional development in Creative Teaching for thousands of teachers." The description implies each of the key elements for collective impact:

- A common agenda is agreed upon among partners.
- Shared measurement includes the outcomes for the Creative Campus Plans and professional/leadership development activities.
- Mutually reinforcing activities reference the overall goal to create arts-rich schools and enable equitable access.
- Continuous communication is implied by the creation of partnerships.
- Backbone support is implied in the collaboration between Austin Independent School District and the nonprofit MINDPOP.

## Coalitions 'R Us

Coalition building creates the same sense of cross-sector engagement and shared decision making as collective impact projects with the added benefit of being more fluid in structure and more sustainable long-term. Although

not all collective impact projects are grant funded, it has been largely true in the arts and cultural education field. Grant funded projects can become somewhat constrained by grant guidelines and time-limited reporting mechanisms, rendering them less nimble and sustainable. By definition, they are usually program-based, implying a finite time span. Coalitions are more suitable for building adaptive processes that encourage authentic collaboration over time.

Coalitions, if properly structured and maintained, look beyond the project and have the ability to set both short-term and long-range goals, be self-regulating, sustainable, and adhere to values that are rigorously collaborative.

## **Strategic and Structural Elements That Enable Effective Coalitions**

The reasons behind coalition start-ups vary: For the practitioner advocate, an impassioned individual becomes determined to take action. The field-builder advocate wishes to transition from collective impact project-based work to a more long range systems change agenda. Policy advocates see an opportunity to reach out to others to work on a state,

regional, or hyper-local issue. Here are some considerations for all types and sizes of coalitions.

### **Strategic elements:**

- *Statement of purpose or mission* (What is the work of the group?)
- *Vision statement* (If the purpose is realized, what does success look like?)
- *Rationale for forming the coalition* (Why is it important to work as a coalition?)
- *Key stakeholders* (Who are the core members of the coalition? Do they represent a diversity of voices?)
- *Context/history* (What is the history of this issue in the local context?)
- *Beliefs* (What are the core value statements that serve as a touchstone in determining policy, budgetary and policy priorities?)
- *Outcomes* (How will outcomes be measured?)

### **Structural elements:**

Structurally, independent coalitions— as distinguished from collective impact projects— need not be complex or high budget operations. Start-up coalitions can work well when managed by volunteers. For example, ArtsEd Tennessee, which is a new coalition, led by a former music educator in 2017. A statewide coalition dedicated to ensuring that every Tennessee student has access to a comprehensive and sequential arts education (dance, music, theatre, visual art), the focus is on promoting supportive arts education policies and essential funding at the state level and building advocacy capacity at the local level. Newly minted as a 501(c)3 nonprofit in 2022, it is led by a volunteer board (no paid staff) composed of educators, business and community leaders from across the state.

*Note: It is not necessary to secure 501(c)3 nonprofit status to form a coalition. However, nonprofit status may be useful as the coalition's work becomes more formalized.*

No matter the size or level of formality of your coalition, a coalition leader may consider some of the following structural elements as they begin their work:

- *Values* play an important part in determining the “right” coalition model.
- *Budgetary Considerations.* Expense budgets may be minimal, especially in the early stages of a coalition. Expenses incurred are typically for communications (online platforms, graphic design), project management, and contractors for project work. Amounts will vary by locale.
- *Revenue Options.* Operating as a network with shared goals means it is also ideal for stakeholders to share the burden of funding the work of the coalition. Start small by encouraging stakeholders closest to the issue to make a financial contribution.
- *Operations.* Key functions that are important to long term success: designated leader, fiscal sponsor/treasurer, chief communicator.
- *Measuring Success.* Affirm a

shared commitment of effort and goals/objectives among key members. Provide an annual check-up to assess progress.

Advocates work continuously to align a vision of the ideal with the reality of the everyday. The iterative work of coalitions means continuous improvising, evolving, building the plane after take-off. And that's a good thing.

Strategery – a mash-up between strategic and wizardry– happens when coalitions are adaptive, committed to authentic collaboration, and open to possibilities.

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*Creative Generation believes that youth create change. We are a values-driven global collective that collaborates with young creatives and those who cultivate their creativity to take local actions towards global changes in pursuit of a more just world. Founded in 2019, Creative Generation operates five signature programs: The Campaign for a Creative Generation, the Institute for Creative*

*Social Transformation, The Academy for Creative Leadership, the Incubator for Creative Impact, and the Foundation for a Creative Generation. [www.Creative-Generation.org](http://www.Creative-Generation.org)*

*The Creative Generation Journal aims to create a scholarly space to amplify the voices of young creatives and practitioners who catalyze social transformation and document and disseminate promising cultural, education, and social change practices which cultivate creativity in youth.*

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Laurie Schell (she/her) serves as the Senior Specialist for Content and Training with a focus on case making and systems change. In this role, she contributes to specific projects related to professional development and curriculum development.

Laurie is founding principal of Laurie Schell Associates | ElevateArtsEd, providing consulting services and issue expertise in arts education. Widely recognized for leadership in the nonprofit and education sectors, Laurie Schell has worked to foster arts education through strategic alliances and partnerships, policy and advocacy campaigns, innovative programs, directed research, and mobilizing constituencies for action.

Ms. Schell served as the the inaugural director of Music Makes Us (2012-2017), the public/private music education initiative in Metro Nashville Public Schools, jointly supported by the mayor's office, music industry, and the school district. During her tenure, participation in music increased to over 60% of the K-12 student population. Forty-five classes were added in 18 schools, with over \$5 million raised in private and government funds to augment district funding.

Previously, Ms. Schell was the executive director of the California Alliance for Arts Education (2001 – 2011), where she led a successful campaign to secure a historic \$605

million investment in K-12 arts education, co-edited numerous policy papers, and co-created the Insider's Guide to Arts Education Planning, now in its 3rd edition.

Ms. Schell holds a B.A. from Stanford University, an M.A. in Liberal Studies/ Dance from Wesleyan University in Connecticut and pursued further studies at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. She currently serves on the board of Save the Music Foundation and ArtsEd Tennessee, a statewide advocacy coalition.